**Taking Responsibility for Student Learning**

Ask a school faculty if they believe all kids can learn, and the answer will likely be a unified and confident *yes*!

But then some educators will start to qualify their responses with *ifs*: “Yes, all kids can learn… *if* the students want to learn… *if* the parents are supportive… *if* our school had more resources… *if* the district, state, and national policymakers would stop hampering our efforts.” Too often, the “*ifs*” are all conditions beyond the school’s control, conditions that ultimately release the educators from responsibility for their students’ learning.

Education attracts people with the noblest intentions. Educators achieve a level of education for which they can make much more money doing something else, yet they choose to serve children. They work tirelessly, care deeply, and sacrifice their own personal time and resources for the benefit of their students. Teachers do not begin each day thinking, how can I disregard the professional evidence and hurt my students? Site and district administrators do not make decisions by thinking, how can I create policies that will make it more difficult for teachers to do their job?

This honest conversation about educational culture begins when an organization asks itself, are we here to *teach*, or are we here to ensure that our students *learn*? Many schools believe it is their job to provide their students the *opportunity* to learn. This teaching-focused philosophy is best captured by the common school mantra “It is the teacher’s job to teach, and the student’s job to learn.” It is virtually impossible for RTI (Response to Intervention) to succeed in this school culture, as the very purpose of RTI is to provide students additional time and support when they don’t succeed after initial teaching. A teaching-focused school believes that its responsibility for student learning ends once the child has been given the opportunity to learn the first time. But a *learning-focused* school understands that the school was not built so that teachers have a place to teach; it was built so that the children of the community have a place to learn. Learning-focused schools embrace RTI, as it is a proven process to help them achieve their mission.

**Believing All Kids Can Learn at High Levels**

Again, ask a school faculty if they believe all kids can learn, and the answer will likely be a unified and confident *yes*!

But ask the same faculty if they believe all kids can learn *at high levels* (high school plus), and you will launch a heated debate. Virtually all educators believe that kids can learn, but many feel that how much a student can learn varies depending on his or her innate abilities and demographic background. This belief creates a sliding scale of student expectations – that is, children who come from parents who are economically stable, English speaking, actively involved, and highly educated are perceived to be more capable of learning at high levels, while children who come from families that are economically disadvantaged, non-English speaking, uninvolved, and uneducated are seen as less capable of meeting rigorous learning expectations. These beliefs are not expressed formally in the school’s mission statement or policies, but they are carried out in school practice every day. The students perceived as being capable of learning at high levels are placed in more rigorous coursework, taught at advanced levels, and expected to achieve, and thus are much more likely to learn at this level. Conversely, the students perceived as being incapable of learning at high levels are placed in below-grade-level curriculum, taught at remedial levels, and expected to achieve at lower levels and, to no one’s surprise, will most likely learn at low levels. These outcomes falsely confirm the school’s initial assumptions and reinforce their misguided practices.

The second assumption is that all students can learn at high levels. We define “high” levels of learning as “high school plus,” meaning every child will graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge required to continue to learn. To compete in the global marketplace of the 21st century, students must continue to learn beyond high school, and there are many paths for that learning, including trade schools, internships, community colleges, and universities. But a high school diploma *alone* is a ticket to nowhere.” (Waller, 2001).

**Does “All” Really Mean “All”?**

Committing to take responsibility for every student’s academic success is a daunting proposition. But if a school settles for anything less than all, then which students deserve no realistic chance at a successful adult life? How many failing students are “acceptable”? As educators, we should provide every student with what we would want and expect for our own child. No parent would view her child’s failure as acceptable simply because the majority of other students succeeded. Our response as educators should be no different.

Many schools struggle with the dilemma of applying this expectation to students with diagnosed disabilities. At almost every school, a small percentage of students have such severe disabilities that it may be virtually impossible for them to reach the standard of *high school plus*. In these instances, it is unfair to ask teachers to take responsibility for these students to learn at high levels. But again, once a school makes an exception to all kids learning, where does the school draw the line on permitting students to achieve anything less than high school plus? Do we draw that line at students with profound disabilities? Students with a specific learning disability? Students with attention deficit disorder (ADD)?

We offer this reply: *all* includes any student who will be expected to live as a financially independent adult someday. For these students, achieving anything less than high school plus will make it virtually impossible to thrive as adults.

If a school has determined beyond a shadow of a doubt that a student is incapable of living independently, it would be appropriate to modify that student’s learning outcomes to better prepare the student for the needs of his or her unique adult life. In no way are we suggesting that these students will not have meaningful adult lives, or that the school is void of responsibility to meet their needs. It is the school’s job to help them maximize the potential for their adult lives, and so the school may need to modify its learning goals accordingly. In all likelihood, these students are severely disabled – a very small percentage of the student population. The majority of students qualified for special education do not meet this criterion, for most of these students will not pay “modified” rent or “accommodated” bills someday. With these rare exceptions, *all* really must mean *all*.